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***De Stijl* and Russian Art: Alexandre Archipenko, El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg; Cubism, Proun, Elementarism¹**

In the 1920s, both as a radical artist and as editor of the avant-garde journal *De Stijl*, Theo van Doesburg watched, with increasing excitement, artistic and architectural developments by Russian artists in the west, and social and engineering developments in Russia itself. In 1922 he was trying to finance a Russian visit by arranging a lecture tour there, and in 1925 he and Kurt Schwitters, the German Dadaist, were again working to arrange a trip to see the Russian experiment, but those arrangements also came to nothing². All that Van Doesburg was able to do was to correspond with Alexandre Archipenko in Paris from 1918, and then he took his first opportunity to seek out El Lissitzky in Berlin in 1922.

Van Doesburg had admired Kandinsky from afar, but the earliest direct impact of the Russian avant-garde on the artists of *De Stijl* was through Alexandre Archipenko, who had been in Paris since 1908 [19, p. 52]. Van Doesburg's panels of *Dance Figures I and II* of 1916 are based on a sculpture of a *Torso* of 1914 by Archipenko, which Van Doesburg reproduced in *De Stijl* in 1920 [1, p. 32, pl. IV]. Archipenko's work fell squarely into Van Doesburg's definition of "Cubist", as he defined it in 1916, published in 1917 under the title of *The New Movement in Painting (De nieuwe beweging in de schilderkunst)* [7].

"The Cubist (a name that is in fact meaningless and was applied in a derisory manner) extracts the mathematical from the natural form and in so doing retains the pure artistic form. This artistic form comes from within: this is the spiritual form; the spiritual form is the plastic; and the plastic, the pure. The Cubist is fully conscious of the plastic value which an object possesses, but for him the object is the logical clarification of Space, and therefore has a deeper, more philosophical meaning for him than for the Impressionist" [7, p. 24].

At this time, Van Doesburg's compositional method involved a kind of "visual dialectic", a balancing or cancelling of compositional elements or "expressional means". In 1919 he first published "Principles of Neo-Plastic Art" (re-published in 1925 as Bauhaus Book 6, [9]) in which

¹ This paper has taken as a point of departure some material published in my book *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into Architecture, Theory into Practice* [14].

² For a record of Van Doesburg's interest in Russia, see for example: [12; 4; 18; 3; 10]. Van Doesburg discusses plans for a trip to Russia in a letter of 24 April 1922 (Collection Mercur), and Schwitters writes of a second possibility in a letter reproduced in Kurt Schippers [20, p. 149].

he described how: “In the exact, formative work of art the formative idea is given direct and actual expression by continual cancelling out of the expressional means: thus a horizontal position is cancelled out by a vertical one, similarly dimension (large by small), and proportion (broad by narrow). One plane is cancelled out by another which circumscribes it or one which is related to it, etc., the same applies to colour: one colour is cancelled out by another (e. g., yellow by blue, white by black), one group of colours by another group of colours and all coloured planes are cancelled out by non-coloured planes and vice versa” [13, p. 33; 8, no. 2, p. 180].

A demonstration of the result of this method is found in his stained-glass composition *Dance I* of 1917, where the right-hand panel of his painted diptych is rotated through 180°, and the two images pressed together to integrate their geometries, completing the “formative idea” (to use Van Doesburg’s term) by this dialectical “cancellation of the expressional means”. The net effect is that all remaining naturalistic references in the painting are suppressed and subordinated to the compositional geometry which is rotationally symmetrical about the vertical axis. The compositional development from the Archipenko sculpture can be more clearly understood by reference to Van Doesburg’s analysis of the sculpture, published in *De Stijl* in January 1920, where he says: “The emphatically straight vertical line in the middle of the sculpture, as a counterpart to the upper plane of the truncated cone, holds the upper section in rest and balance. On this line the two halves appear to rotate, a movement reinforced by the conical plinth. Though in its subject still a classically conceived sculpture, the mathematically determined form and pronounced posture endow this with a thoroughly modern spirit” [1, p. 32].

From at least 22 January 1918 Van Doesburg and Archipenko had been in direct correspondence³, and since the earliest days of *De Stijl*, works by Archipenko had been illustrated and analysed by various contributors, including another *Dance* sculpture discussed by Vilmos Huszar in the second issue, December 1917 [16, p. 23]; a *Gondolier*, analysed in detail by Georges Vantongerloo, September 1918 [22, p. 134–135] (Fig. 1); *La Boxe*, illustrated and praised by Van Doesburg as a “conscious expression of our own time”, like his own work *Composition X*, April 1919 [12, p. 64]; *Deux Femmes*, 1919 (compared with each other in “Bijlage X”, June 1920 [4]); and *Femme Debout* (without further comment), in March 1921 [11]. The broad, consistent, and deep influence Archipenko had on *De Stijl*’s direction in general and Van Doesburg’s in particular, was about to be accelerated by the refining influence that El Lissitzky’s *Proun* (Fig. 2) was to have on the Dutchman’s artistic and architectural development.



BILAGE XVI VAN „DE STIJL” EERSTE JAARGANG No. II. ANALYTISSCH SCHEMA VAN „LE GONDOLIER” VAN ALEX. ARCHIPENKO (Zie Bijlage XIV No. III).

Fig. 1. “Gondolier”, by Alexandre Archipenko

³ Letters in the Van Doesburg Archive, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague.

In June 1921 Van Doesburg published the first in a series of articles called “The Significance of the Mechanical Aesthetic for Architecture and the other Professions” [5, pp.164-166]. This was an important statement of his latest theoretical position, and in its second instalment in July he quoted Lenin that “if we could only build a great number of electricity generating stations across the land, we could accomplish a work of great cultural/historical significance” [6, no. 28, p. 179]. A year *before* meeting Lissitzky, Van Doesburg warned against the danger of “aesthetic sentimentalism” which bound architects to traditional form and style. He advocated a “formless” architecture, free of the *a priori*, but arbitrary, compositional rules of the styles. He insisted that: “Even form in the sense of a typical product of the character of an age and a people is not the aim of the new art, and the search for a new architectural “form” is just as wrong as copying old aesthetic formulae” [5, no. 28, pp. 182-183]. Architectural form was properly the result of the internal logic of mathematics, the character of the material, the mechanical means of production and the independent means of architecture, to achieve “formless monumentality”.

In terms of Van Doesburg’s actual architectural involvement at that time, he produced a colour-scheme for a housing project and for a school opposite it in the small Dutch town of Drachten with the architect Cornelis de Boer. The original architectural drawings were submitted for planning permission on 30 May 1921, and Van Doesburg received them at the beginning of October to develop his colour scheme. By September the design appears to have been completed and a mutual friend, Evert Rinsema, was able to write to Van Doesburg that “De Boer is, I think I am safe in saying, over the moon with your work”⁴. This design was in primary colours, and the other for the school was in secondary colours calculated to produce “the movement of the colours and the logical proportion relating to the essence of the building”⁵. In Van Doesburg’s analyses, the coloured architectural elements generated diagonal movement running across the facades corresponding to the “lines of force” used in Van Doesburg and Vantongerloo in their analyses of Archipenko’s sculptures. The colour-scheme for the housing was duly carried out, but met such critical opposition that De Boer and Rinsema leapt to the defensive. Van Doesburg, who was at the Bauhaus in Weimar during October 1921, persevered with the exterior designs for the School, which were finished by 2 November⁶. Van Doesburg was concurrently producing colour-schemes for architectural projects by J. J. P. Oud for municipal housing in Rotterdam. In short, though the proposals were just to paint the simple elements of the architecture, window-sashes, doors, lintels, etc., these designs, like those for De Boer, were calculated to disrupt the closed nature of the architecture by creating movement and “cancelling” one element and “line of force” by another, as he described in “Principles of Neo-plastic Art”. On his part, Oud found the disruption too great, an argument ensued, putting an end to their collaboration. The day after he finished the exterior designs for the School, on 3 November 1921, Van Doesburg wrote to Oud: “No, no, no, either this way, or not at all!”⁷ Oud made a decisive choice.

This approach to architecture ended in failure, certainly in the theoretical terms laid out in his series of articles on the “Significance of the Mechanical Aesthetic”, published over the

⁴ In a letter dated 1 September 1921 [20, p. 176].

⁵ Drawing formerly in the collection of Dirk Rinsema, Meppel.

⁶ Herman Martin, reproduced in: [20, p. 177]; and Van Doesburg, reproduced in [20, p. 186].

⁷ Letter in the collection of the Institute Néelandaïs, Paris, quoted in: [21, p. 177].

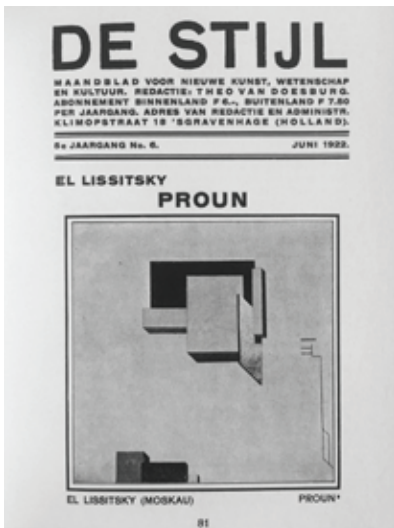


Fig. 2. El Lissitzky, “Proun”, as published in *De Stijl*, V, no. 6, June 1922, p. 81



Fig. 3. “Theo van Doesburg (right) and C. Van Eesteren (left) working on the architectural model in their studio in Paris”, published in *De Stijl*, VI, 6-7, series XII, 1924, p. 73. A “counter-composition” for one of the houses can be seen to Van Doesburg’s left

immediately preceding months. The collapse of his collaboration with Oud left Van Doesburg in a difficult position, since he had a long-standing invitation, issued as early as 3 January 1920, to exhibit designs and models by him and Oud at Léonce Rozenberg’s *Galerie de l’Effort Moderne* in Paris⁸.

A few months after his split with Oud, Van Doesburg was in Berlin to deliver his manifesto lecture, “The Will to Style”, and on 24 April 1922 he wrote excitedly to De Boer that: “After a stay of fourteen days in Berlin, I’m back again in Weimar. ... In Berlin I got to know all the artists I could, and what was most interesting was that, besides Kandinsky, I also spoke with Lissitzky and other artists who have played such an important role. My expectations concerning their work were not proved wrong: the younger ones all work in the *same spirit as ours*, that is to say, Neo-plastic”⁹.

He also wrote of advice from Kandinsky concerning a trip to Russia. The next month, from 29–31 May, Van Doesburg, Lissitzky, and Hans Richter together signed a “Clarification” under the name of the International Faction of Constructivists at the International Congress of Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf, published in the “April” issue of *De Stijl*. The basis of the new-found solidarity with El Lissitzky can be found in the publication of the text of Lissitzky’s “Proun”, dated Moscow 1920, in the June issue. For Lissitzky, “Proun” (“Project for the Affirmation of the New”) was a constantly developing, dynamic idea, which can be seen by com-

⁸ Letter of 3 January 1920 from Rosenberg to Van Doesburg, in the Van Doesburg Archive, Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst.

⁹ Collection Mercurius; Van Doesburg spoke again of the trip in a letter of 4 May 1922, in the same collection.

paring the versions published here in *De Stijl* and given as a lecture at the INCHUK session on 23 October 1924¹⁰. The former is for the most part contained in the latter more extended text; both include the important statements that:

“The forms with which the Proun makes its assault on space are constructed not from aesthetics but from *material*. In the initial stations of the Prouns this *material* is *colour*. ... Material form moves in space along specific *axes*: along the diagonal or spiral of a staircase, along the vertical of an elevator shaft, along the horizontal of a railroad, along the straight lines and curves of an aeroplane. Confronted with each of these movements, material falls into the appropriate order — which is **Construction** [my emphasis]. ... Cubist composition moves along the rails of the earth. Construction germinates in Suprematism and moves along the straight lines and curves of aerospace. It advances through the new space. The Proun constructs within it. ... [Proun] begins ... on the two-dimensional surface, we then pass on to three-dimensional, model constructions and to the needs of life.

On the *one* hand, the Proun has abandoned the picture and the artist, and, on the *other*, has left behind the machine and the engineer. The Proun advances towards the creation of a new space, and by dividing it into the elements ... passing through all dimensions, [the Proun] constructs a polyhedral, but uniform image of our nature” [18, pp. 83–85; 17, pp. 68–70].

For Van Doesburg, this was hugely liberating with its talk of colour as material; planes in movement along axes, dancing through space; generating Construction, leaving Cubist, Suprematist, artistic composition and engineering machine-calculation behind. Van Doesburg dedicated a whole issue of *De Stijl* (V, 10/11, 1922) to Lissitzky’s “Tale of Two Squares”. Compared with his own contemporary Neo-plastic work that essentialised natural form by removing caprice and curves, and progressively imposing a tightening geometrical compositional control, Lissitzky’s open composition of multiple, even rotational, axes, offered huge possibilities. Van Doesburg’s architectural contributions to date had produced disappointing results in conflict with the closed nature of the architecture to which they were applied. Lissitzky hadn’t yet had direct architectural involvement other than in his teaching, but Proun claimed to have a generative power to create a totally new architecture where material, form, mathematics and aesthetic were one.

In the *De Stijl* issue of September 1922, Van Doesburg published a following instalment of his series of articles “The Balance of the New; Creative Russia — Suprematism — Neo-Plasticism — Proun — Contra-composition”, where he was clearly trying to situate his own ideas *vis-à-vis* the newest art coming out of Russia. His analysis was that: “Suprematism did not result in development, using the plane. Had Suprematism finally ended composition according to nature (that is in terms of form), and come to composition according to art (that is to say in the plane as objective means of expression), but that wasn’t accomplished. By contrast, the significance of Neo-plasticism is much more positive and real in character. The plane is a real expressive means without symbolic or imaginary value. It didn’t arise out of a need to ‘dot the i’, so to speak, or come to a full stop, or out of a longing to ‘destroy the thing in itself’, but quite the opposite, out of the necessity to bring polar elements into a balanced relationship, by so doing to create fulness of life in the most precise and real way” [3, pp. 133–134].

¹⁰ Published and translated by John E. Bowlst as ‘Prounen’ in: [17, pp. 59–71].

Lissitzky's ideas had focused and refined Van Doesburg's theoretical position, but clearly Van Doesburg was insistent that his Elementarist Counter-Compositions offered more in terms of their artistically generative power. Suprematism had reduced painting to an absolute zero, while Proun and the Counter-compositions of Elementarism produced the constructive means (including Lissitzky's notion of colour as material) to generate a new coloured architecture through an intuitive mathematics of form.

In 1923 Lissitzky exhibited his "Prounenraum" at the Great Berlin Art Exhibition. He has extended Proun painting, into dynamic Constructivist reliefs. The cubic, notional "room" is exploded, not just in terms of its representation, but opened out in terms of universal space with shifting, multiple, non-orthogonal axes. This has implications both for movement within the "room", and also for elements within a "formless" architecture.

The same year Van Doesburg succeeded in mounting an important De Stijl exhibition (Fig. 3) in the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne, which contained significant architectural models, including one that seems to have been primarily his own work, with input by the young Cornelis van Eesteren who had taken Van Doesburg's Counter-course at the Bauhaus¹¹. The designs for a "Maison d'Artiste" were primarily the work of Van Doesburg, who produced strictly orthogonal coloured Counter-constructive analyses. These designs came closest to a unity of colour and architectural form — with colour as material, planes in movement, an open architecture perfectly calculated with elements cancelling one another to produce a "balance of the new" — an Elementarist architecture. Elementarist architecture was quite distinct from Proun, but exposure to Lissitzky's Proun at this point was critical in loosening the closed nature of Van Doesburg's limited engagement in architecture.

The encounter had been extremely fruitful, and was probably helpful for Lissitzky as well, in focusing his attention on architecture. They had much to offer one another, but there was to be no further direct collaboration, as there had briefly been at the Düsseldorf Conference. In June 1924 Lissitzky wrote a frustrated letter to Oud complaining that he disagreed with Van Doesburg about the use of curves and that "the modern machine has to have round forms". More public criticism of Lissitzky by Van Doesburg was to follow, making further collaboration impossible [17, p. 73]¹². As with other collaborations, either on a theoretical basis as with Mondriaan, or a practical basis as with Oud, Van Doesburg's final position was the shrill response: "No, no, no! Either this way or not at all!"

Title. *De Stijl* and Russian Art: Alexandre Archipenko, El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg; Cubism, Proun, Elementarism.

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Abstract. From 1918, the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg, editor of the avant-garde artistic journal *De Stijl* had been in touch with the Russian sculptor Alexandre Archipenko, who at the time was living in Paris. Archipenko had a considerable impact on Van Doesburg and other artists within the orbit of the magazine. In 1920, Van Doesburg published El Lissitzky's Constructivist fairy-tale "Suprematist Development of Two Squares, in Six Constructions" in *De Stijl*. Van Doesburg excitedly wrote to a friend "that architects must surround themselves much more with these kinds of works ... and through them to begin to sense the

¹¹ For an extended commentary on the authorship of the models, see: [14, pp. 141–161].

¹² For Van Doesburg's public criticism of Lissitzky see: [6, p. 58; 10, p. 426].

endless spatial possibilities at the same time as coming to realise these possibilities in practice". Lissitzky had a liberating influence on Van Doesburg's development of Elementarism, and the Dutchman desperately wanted to travel to Russia. He clearly felt an affinity with the Russian's work and ideas, which was confirmed when they met personally in Berlin in April 1922. The next month, Van Doesburg, Lissitzky and Hans Richter formed an alliance as the 'International Faction of Constructivists' at the 'International Conference of Progressive Artists' in Dusseldorf, and in June Van Doesburg published Lissitzky's article 'Proun' (dated Moscow 1920) in *De Stijl*.

The Dutch radical artist was strongly influenced both in formal terms by the 'Cubism' of Archipenko and theoretically by the Constructivism of Lissitzky. Over the next year this was very fruitful in terms of Van Doesburg's increasingly architectural oeuvre. Yet very soon differences between them resulted in mutual criticism, some of it became very public by 1926. As Proun and Elementarism developed, fault-lines appeared, and those years from 1920 to 1926 were pivotal so it is essential to explore the works and the writings of both the Russians and the Dutchman to understand precisely what was at stake in the theory and practice that first drew them into such a strong alliance, and then quite as strongly pushed them apart. The result of this study will clarify our vision of these astonishing works produced in the crucible of artistic revolution.

Keywords: Archipenko; Lissitzky; Van Doesburg; De Stijl; Cubism; Proun; Elementarism; Constructivism; Neo-plastic; Kandinsky; Suprematism.

Название статьи. «Де Стейл» и русское искусство: Архипенко, ван Дуйсбург и Лисицкий; кубизм, элементаризм, проун.

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Аннотация. С 1918 г. голландский художник Тео ван Дуйсбург, издатель авангардистского художественного журнала «Де Стейл», взаимодействовал с русским скульптором Александром Архипенко, жившим тогда в Париже. Архипенко имел существенное влияние на ван Дуйсбурга и иных художников, причастных к журналу. В 1920 г. ван Дуйсбург опубликовал в «Де Стейл» «Супрематический сказ про два квадрата, в шести конструкциях» Эля Лисицкого. Он восторженно писал одному из друзей, что «архитекторы должны окружить себя подобными работами <...> и через них ощутить бесконечные пространственные возможности, одновременно приходя к пониманию этих возможностей на практике». Эль Лисицкий оказал раскрепощающее воздействие на развитие у ван Дуйсбурга принципов элементаризма, и тот мечтал совершить поездку в Россию. Он отчетливо чувствовал близость идей и работ Лисицкого, что подтвердилось, когда они встретились в апреле 1922 г. в Берлине. В следующем месяце на Интернациональном конгрессе прогрессивного искусства в Дюссельдорфе ван Дуйсбург, Лисицкий и Ханс Рихтер образовали союз под названием «Международная фракция конструктивистов», и затем, в июне, ван Дуйсбург опубликовал в «Де Стейл» статью Лисицкого «Проун» (дата и место издания обозначены как: Москва, 1920).

Голландский радикальный художник испытал сильное влияние кубизма Архипенко в отношении художественной практики и конструктивизма Лисицкого в отношении теории. В продолжении года это влияние было весьма плодотворным и сказалось в появлении новых и новых архитектурных работ ван Дуйсбурга. Однако очень скоро обозначившиеся различия привели его и Лисицкого к обоюдной критике, в 1926 г. ее отголоски стали известны общественности. С развитием проуна и элементаризма между ними произошел решительный разрыв. Период с 1920 по 1926 г. был переломным для обоих художников, и чрезвычайно важно исследовать произведения и теоретические сочинения ван Дуйсбурга и Лисицкого, дабы уяснить, что же было «на кону» в теории и в практике, когда между ними впервые обозначилось столь сильное взаимное отчуждение, в результате которого они впоследствии окончательно разошлись. Результат настоящего исследования уточнит наше видение этих потрясающих работ, созданных в горниле художественной революции.

Ключевые слова: Архипенко; Лисицкий; ван Дуйсбург; «Де Стейл»; кубизм; проун; элементаризм; конструктивизм; неопластицизм; Кандинский; супрематизм.

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